

Friendship Heights TMD Advisory Committee Meeting
Summary – Meeting of Oct 13, 2009

2

Voting Members Present

April Birnbaum	Lerch, Early and Brewer, Representing New England Development
Tiffany Gee	Chevy Chase Land Company
David Glass	Chevy Chase Village Board of Managers
Leonard Grant	Friendship Heights Village Council
Bill McCloskey	Citizens Coordinating Committee on Friendship Heights
Robert Schwarzbart (Chair)	Friendship Heights Village Council
R. Mallory Starr (Vice Chair)	Somerset House Management Association

Non-Voting Members Present

Sandra L. Brecher	DOT/Transit Services Division-Commuter Services
-------------------	---

TMD Staff Present

Nakengi Byrd	DOT/Transit Services Division-Commuter Services
Jim Carlson	DOT/Transit Services Division-Commuter Services
Sheila Wilson	DOT/Transit Services Division-Commuter Services

Absent

William P. Farley	Town of Somerset [arrived but could not access meeting room]
Chief Roy Gordon	Chevy Chase Village Police
Capt. Russell Hamill	Montgomery County Police
Kenneth Hartman	B-CC Services Center
Mary Herman	Polinger Shannon and Luchs (Employer 50 or greater)
Gregory Knoop	Oudens Knoop Knoop + Sachs Architects (Employer of fewer than 50)
Jessica Moore	The JBG Companies
Carlean Russell	Saks Fifth Avenue (Employer of 50 or greater)
Kenneth Williams	GEICO

Guests

Gary Erenrich	Montgomery County DOT
Marc Esposito	Bloomingtondale's
Bob Joiner	The Agenda News
Julian Mansfield	Friendship Heights Village
Christina Norris	Wisconsin Place
Barbara Tauben	Friendship Heights Village Civic Assn.
David Torchinsky	Law Offices of Binstock, Torchinsky and Associates

Items 1, 2 – Introductions/Agenda Review (additions/deletions): Members introduced themselves. September's minutes were approved with changes.

Item 3 – Chair's Comments: Robert Schwarzbart noted that Item 6 on the agenda regarding the future meeting venue will include a committee vote. He also thanked April Birnbaum for her recent service and that a Certificate

of Appreciation would be prepared. **Ms. Birnbaum** announced that this meeting would be her last one and she would like the certificate to be mailed.

Mr. Schwarzbart called attention to two letters in the meeting packet. The first is a thank you letter to **Councilmember Nancy Floreen** for her contributions to the September meeting. The second letter is the committee authorized letter advocating for the Village of Friendship Heights Post Office to remain open. The post office is scheduled for closure due to budgetary constraints. **Mr. Schwarzbart** referred updates about the post office to **Julian Mansfield**.

Mr. Mansfield thanked the committee for the letter of support. However, despite all the letters of support from federal, state, and local agencies, the post office was still on the list of closures as of Friday 10/9/09. **Mr. Mansfield** said the fight is still not over as there is a final list coming out in November for the closings due in January. There is an appeal process, but he is not optimistic about it because the process is only based on procedural matters and not for advocacy. The Village has been trying to have a face to face meeting with Post Office officials, but so far without success. **Mr. Mansfield** said he is still collecting petitions and sending letters. **Mr. Schwarzbart** explained the details of **Mr. Mansfield's** efforts, stating that he (Mr. Mansfield) had urged the entire congressional delegation to write letters, including County Executive Leggett and County Council members. **Mr. Mansfield** also obtained 3300 signatures from Village of Friendship Heights residents.

Ms. Brecher asked about the location of the next nearest post office. **Mr. Mansfield** said the nearest post office was about two miles away on Connecticut Avenue and Chevy Chase Circle; however the distance is difficult for the Village's high population of disabled and senior citizens.

David Glass said that distance is a problem for everyone. On the other hand, the postal service is losing money and cannot continue the expense of operating offices so close together. **Mr. Mansfield** said that the high disabled population makes the Village unique.

Ms. Brecher asked if post office concentration in Bethesda is due to the many businesses in that area and if there were any objective criteria on which these decisions are based. **Mr. Mansfield** said that postal officials mentioned 'concentrated urban areas' as one decision criterion. Also, postal officials made reference to high rent problems; however, **Mr. Mansfield** spoke with the landlord of the FHV PO, and he indicated that this issue had not been brought to his attention.

Item 4 – Discussion/Q&A of WMATA/MoCo Joint Issues: **Mr. Schwarzbart** introduced **Gary Erenrich**, Special Assistant to DOT Director for WMATA.

Mr. Erenrich passed out handouts and explained that Metro was looking into why ridership has been down during the months of June-August. Over the past 5 years the ridership trend has shown an increase but now it is decreasing. After the June 22nd accident, Red Line service was reduced to a one-third, which could be a reason for ridership reduction. However, now that service has been restored, Metro is waiting to see if the downturn will continue or if it was temporary. Also, another reason for down ridership could be due to unemployment, and this is still being analyzed as a possibility. **Mr. Erenrich** said data collected at Friendship Heights and Bethesda Metro stations shows ridership has been decreasing for five or six months and not just the months of June and July.

Mr. Erenrich passed out two more handouts: One showed ridership on the L7 & L8 Connecticut Avenue Lines and the other was of the presentation he made as Chair of the Council of Governments (COG) Technical Committee to the Transportation Planning Board. **Mr. Erenrich** suggested the TMD Advisory Committee have a member of the Transportation Planning Board as a future guest for a more in-depth discussion. He added that

Montgomery County is tops in the region for providing alternative transportation services, which, as a result, causes less overall impact on the transportation system.

Mr. Erenrich announced a public hearing tonight (Oct. 13) regarding the Metro Q2 Route, which runs between Silver Spring and Shady Grove. The Q2 route has high ridership but unreliable travel time and other inefficiencies. Metro has been examining the route for several months trying to see how to make it run more efficiently. Although the budget is tight, there is money available for service improvements. Metro is looking at other routes in the 24 corridor system - the Q2 is the first.

The Montgomery County Bus Rapid Transit (BRT) study will be starting by the end of the year. Metro is hosting town hall meetings, and each jurisdiction is planning its own event. Next week is the DC town hall meeting, which will be a panel discussion format. **Mr. Erenrich** did not know what particular events that Maryland & Virginia had planned but welcomed the committee to attend Maryland's meeting.

Mr. Erenrich referenced the Friendship Heights and Bethesda ridership handouts, which showed Friendship Heights ridership numbers were high in 2008 fiscal year (July-June) and in previous years as well as last April, through June due to higher gas prices. However, starting March, 2009 ridership decreased and has continued on a downward trend with August at an all time low in five years. This indicates the downward trend started before June's accident, which has resulted in a \$20 million Metro budget gap.

The usual increase for previous years has been two to three percent on rail and one percent on buses. Now Metro is seeing a leveling off or decrease, which is leading to different budget projections. Bethesda's ridership is generally a little higher than Friendship Heights by about 1,000 more a day; Bethesda is in the same situation as Friendship Heights but not all station ridership numbers have been analyzed. The bus downward trend is more significant on the Connecticut Avenue line, with a twenty to twenty-five percent decrease.

Fares have remained the same, and in January paper transfers were stopped; however the downward trend was occurring long before.

Ms. Brecher asked how the overall trend in Friendship Heights and Bethesda compares with the rest of the system. **Mr. Erenrich** said that Metro and Ride On ridership has been down more in the last four or five months than previous years and service reductions are not enough to cover the budget shortfall, probably because our transit fares are the cheapest in the nation. There will need to be a significant fare increase to meet the deficit. Metro's policy is to have a fare increase every two years based on cost of living increases; however due to the economic crisis there has not been enough of a cost of living increase to warrant fare increases. Last year Metro was able to halt fare increases by using the economic stimulus money to reallocate capital into operating funds. The Metro Board is not in favor of reallocation now because of AAA rating concerns. **Mr. Erenrich** believes if the downward trend continues then more people will go back to using their cars rather than taking mass transit.

A committee member asked **Mr. Erenrich** if he has seen a correlation between down ridership and unemployment. He said he has seen it on rail and it is probably true for buses as well, but Metro does not have the resources to do a full analysis other than looking at number trends.

It was suggested that some the reason for rider drop off may be because the Metro cars are more crowded due to removal of seats. **Mr. Erenrich** said he did not think this was the case, because not all the cars had seats removed. He said when Metro first started operating, its cars reflected more of a commuter rail system but it has grown into an Urban Rapid Rail system having cars with fewer seats, designed to carry people shorter distances. In the future

rail cars will reflect an urban rapid rail system sacrificing comfort for capacity. However, Metro has issues with the cost of implementing structural changes when ridership is down.

David Glass asked about the cost of adding two cars to the trains. **Mr. Erenrich** said initially the system did not have the power to operate with the extra cars, but funding for the last five years has allowed Metro to update the system. Metro has enough cars to operate at fifty percent of capacity by the end of the year again.

Mr. Schwarzbart asked if news coverage regarding June's accident have contributed to decrease ridership. **Mr. Erenrich** agreed this was the case; however many riders have remained loyal because of transit benefits and restricted work parking, they have a strong commitment to public transportation. The only major service drop-off due to the accident affected the Red Line because service was reduced.

Mr. Erenrich gave a summary of the survey work done by the Transportation Planning Board looking at regional activity, which showed how Bethesda and Friendship Heights (combined for statistical purposes) is second to downtown Washington in the lowest daily auto trips per household: 15.5. This is mainly due to location - the needs of the community such as employment, shopping, schools and recreation are within walking distance. Information on employment trends is forthcoming. In response to a question, **Mr. Erenrich** explained from the chart that a "0" worker household is used for those that are retired.

A committee member asked about Metro's current policy of stopping trains at the front of the platform. **Mr. Erenrich** said this been well received by train operators because they do not have to remember how many cars are on their train; the change will be permanent until the system reverts back to automatic operation.

In response to a question about when the Wisconsin Place Metro entrance will reopen, **Mr. Erenrich** said he didn't know but would find out.

Mr. Schwarzbart asked if Metro made any corrective measures in regard to driver/bus accidents. **Mr. Erenrich** said Metro has retrained all bus operators and reorganized the bus department to allow for more direct lines of communication and more control given to supervisors.

Item 5 Presentation -Transportation Demand Management: **Ms. Brecher** provided an overview of the Transportation Demand Management (presentation included in FHTMD AC summary)

After the presentation, **Ms. Brecher** explained the building of bus shelters is based on an agreement between the County and Clear Channel that grew out of a 10 year lawsuit when the County outlawed billboards. Clear Channel sued the County and out of the settlement agreement Clear Channel was given the right to build bus shelters, some with and some without advertising. **Ms. Brecher** explained that D.C. also has a contract with Clear Channel, which is different from Montgomery County's in that D.C. also has a bike sharing program called Smart Bike included in the contract. The question now is what will happen when Clear Channel completes its obligation under the settlement; because the County does not have funding to build additional bus shelters they may have to renegotiate a new contract with Clear Channel. Over all, County revenues are down from the ad shelters but bus advertising is still producing revenue.

Mr. Carlson said that the bus shelter across from the McDonald's on Wisconsin Place is going to be replaced.

Mr. Schwarzbart expressed his concerns about the slow response time of bus shelter repairs, citing the three years it took to replace the broken bench at the bus stop across from the Irene apartments on Willard Avenue. He explained that **Ms. Brecher** was instrumental in getting the bench replaced. **Ms. Brecher** explained that replacing

the bench was a unique situation because it along with other benches in Friendship Heights was purchased through a grant from the State of Maryland.

Ms. Brecher added that overall funding for TMD services has been negatively impacted by staff and marketing budget cut backs. Marketing of alternative transportation programs to the employment community is important.

She explained also that having a good transit system is costly, and continues to be a challenge because the country as a whole has prioritized the automobile as the main mode of travel, reinforced through millions of dollars in yearly advertising. Only recently has more money as a percentage of overall transportation spending been put into mass transit infrastructure.

Ms. Brecher said the County does not have the ideal funding. However, staff makes the best of what is available. For example, the TMD Advisory Committee provides a means hearing the community's needs. The County has been proactive in supplying effective transit service by having the CSS staff work to achieve the 39 percent non-auto driver mode share established for the TMD.

Item 6 Future Meeting Venue-Discussion: **Mr. Schwarzbart** raised his concerns about moving the committee meeting venue from Somerset Community Clubhouse to the Friendship Heights TMD offices (TRiPS Commuter Store) on Wisconsin Circle. **Mr. Schwarzbart** has been working with TMD staff to bring more elected State and County leaders, and senior transportation officials to the meetings, most recently **Councilmember Nancy Floreen** and **Gary Erenrich**. Besides making the meetings more interesting overall, bringing in these primary sources can provide members with the best possible information and, because these officials are more familiar with the committee and its purpose, they may be more likely to support a position that the committee needs to take. **Mr. Schwarzbart** added that these efforts are enhanced by the ability to present a particularly nice environment, such as Somerset (with thanks to Vice Chair **Mallory Starr**), which is provided at no cost to the county. The Somerset facility imparts a general sense of significance. **Councilmember Floreen** praised that location about three times during her September visit.

Ms Brecher explained that it has always been the County's plan for the advisory committee to meet at the TMD offices. This purpose was also included in Chevy Chase Land Company development approval and the Friendship Heights Master Plan. Commuter Services, Chevy Chase Land Company and the County invested resources to furnish the space with the purpose of holding advisory committee meetings. Also the TRiPs store is more centrally located to buses and rail than is Somerset. **Ms. Brecher** she said she understands the concerns about space; however, compared to other County meeting rooms it is not that bad and things can be done to make the space more aesthetically appealing. If more space is required, the stores front end space is available because the store does not open until 11am; and the Wisconsin Place recreation center is available also if a larger venue is needed for special events. People attending the meetings are reimbursed for transportation and dependent care expenses.

Mr. Starr said the TMD meeting room may not accommodate the whole committee should everyone show up; also the ceiling fan is a distraction and he does not know what other options there are for ventilation.

Mr. Schwarzbart continued, explaining that the efforts to bring in political representatives, who affect transportation policy and can provide support to the committee, are enhanced by providing the best possible setting such as the Somerset Clubhouse. He also does not see where the Committee's lack of use of the TMD offices is a budget problem, considering the committee meets only once a month. Any other time the store space is not being used. **Mr. Schwarzbart** also believes the small space will inhibit attendance.

Leonard Grant said that he does not think the TRiPs space can accommodate people during meeting sessions. The space in Somerset reflects high standards and careful attention to the needs of the AC from policy makers. He suggested the TRiPs store only be used if there is some type of inspection but Somerset is the main meeting place.

Ms. Birnbaum suggested looking into using the Friendship Heights Recreation Center.

Mr. Carlson feels we should use the TRiPs store because the County has made a significant investment and the store's location is central in the TMD, providing better access to points of interest for the committee and proximity to transit.

Mr. Schwarzbart reflected **Mr. Starr's** comments of using the Somerset house as the main meeting venue and use the TRiPs store for walk around.

A majority of committee members present voted in favor continuing to meet at the Somerset Clubhouse, but to have November's meeting again at the TMD offices in order to tour the Wisconsin Place recreation center.

The other agenda items were tabled till next meeting on November 10, 2009